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ABSTRACT

In this essay teachers, school curriculum and their relationship to the society they serve and the community in which they function are discussed. Since educational institutions serve a regulatory function, what goes on in schools mirrors the interests of the status quo in the society. Therefore the question facing educators and community people is not whether schools should reflect the society but rather: (1) What are the interests that educational institutions reflect? (2) What are the manifestations of that reflection? and (3) Can the society and its educational institutions transform themselves? American society is organized to represent the interests of a capitalistic ruling class and schools serve the interests of the ruling class. The manner in which they have accomplished this purpose has changed as the demands of ruling class interests have altered. Teachers and schools can play a progressive role in transforming the society. The first task of the school as part of a community is to begin to make cultural criticism the basis of its curriculum and its instructional program. An examination of school policies and practices is filled with possibilities for curriculum development if teachers learn to use them. (Author/AM)

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TEACHERS, CURRICULUM AND THE COMMUNITY

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This essay is about teachers and school curriculum and their relationship to the society they serve and the community in which they function. Since educational institutions serve a regulatory function (i.e. the true reason for which they exist is to prepare people to fit smoothly into the operational patterns of other social institutions); what goes on in schools will mirror the interests of the status quo in any society. To say that American schools reflect the dominant interests of American society is an anthropolical truism. Therefore the question facing educators and community people is not: ought schools reflect our society but rather: 1) what are the interests that our educational institutions reflect? 2) what are the manifestations of that reflection? and 3) can our society and its educational institutions transform themselves?

That American society is organized to represent the interests of a capitalist ruling class has been documented to my satisfaction by Michelson[1], Apple[2], Mann[3], Gintis[4], and a host of others and does not concern me in this essay. Instead I want to explore the way in which American schools manifest the interests of a capitalist ruling class and the possibilities for social/educational transformation within that context.

Although schools have always served the dominant interests in our society the manner in which they have accomplished this purpose has changed as the demands of ruling class interest have altered. In the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth century sub cultures in American society were diverse and potent. School was not necessarily the primary source of enabling knowledge for large numbers of people. Social relations in capitalist America through the early twentieth century did not require the vast numbers of people with standard

institutional behavior patterns; reading; speaking and writing skills demanded by our contemporary bureaucratic state. The emergence of the bureaucratic state along with the altered requirements of the American economy spured the development of universal, mass education. However, the changing needs of a class dominated society should not be confused with restructuring of the relationship of the classes to each other within that society. Universal education was never intended nor has it resulted in the destruction of the class basis of our society.

By the mid-twentieth century the greatly increased demands of the various governmental and private bureaucracies, the growth of white collar and service occupations put pressure on schools to accomodate ever larger student populations for longer and longer periods of time. Public education ceased to, if indeed it ever did, provide vocational training. Increasingly schools credentialed people i.e. certified that they were ready for entry status in the job market. No one seemed to mind much when the job market was expanding and most anyone who could get through school and many who did not could get a decent job, paying a livable wage. No one seemed to notice that the amount of schooling required for occupation after occupation steadily increased. A complex world demands more highly educated workers the logic went. As the American economy slowed down in the early seventies some of the conventional wisdom about schooling and its role in society could no longer be sustained.

In The Great Training Robbery Ivar Berg[5] exploded the myth that colleges train people for employment. In truth they increasingly serve to keep people out of the job market and provide them with credentials. The knowledge and skills necessary to perform competently in most white collar occupations, many so called professions, and virtually all blue collar jobs do not require a college education. However for a while because longer and longer schooling help people off the job market the real problem was concealed: that there are no longer enough jobs for all the people who want to maintain their middle class status and/or for all those

who aspire to middle class status that the American political and economic system is supposed to be able to deliver when you follow the rules and work hard. Instead of a good life vs a better life it is becoming increasingly clear that the question posed by our political and economic structure in the 1970's is: do we want a continued high rate of unemployment or do we want a greatly increased labor force contesting for poorly paid jobs. It is within this social policy context that the major educational policy decisions of the next decade will be made. As Deitch has already pointed out:

> "Pressure is building to permit youngsters to start working at an earlier age, at a lower minimum wage, and substitute on-the-job learning for the classroom. Current experimental 'work study' programs in high school and college are ripe for expansion into a large pool of employables available to compete with existing underemployed labor. . .A society unable to invest rapidly enough in real production doesn't require a dynamic expanding educational system. What it does require is an educational machine to train people to accept jobs below their capabilities and in increasing competition with other workers for a piece of a declining standard of living. . . The restructuring of the educational system is going hand in hand with changing labor requirements, the corporate need to modify the character and capability of the work force under new 'managed' capitalism. . . . Stated another way, a depression-oriented economy is employing a revamped educational system to retard the development of a dynamic and productive working class."[6]

For several years now "Career Education" has been a popular catch phrase among educational policy makers. Sociologists such as James Coleman are rediscovering the joys and benifits of early exposure to the world of work. One is tempted to ask why so little attention was given the educationally redemptive aspects of the work a day world when the unemployment rate was lower.

To tell the American public that children must enter the labor force as menials because educational practice has failed is a reactionary hoax. See for example "Career Education: Program on a White Horse" by LaDucca and Barnett.[7] In fact contemporary educational practice has succeeded quite well at doing

what was asked of it by the dominant interests of our society in the past and today educational practice is being modified to accomodate the changing requirements of those interests. Not to benefit the masses of American children. This is not to say educational practice should not be changed. It should. In serving well the social, political and economic interests of the powerful few, public schools have failed countless thousands of poor, and working class children of all races whose interests are not and cannot be served within the existing educational and social structure. Rist has documented with chilling clarity the extent to which class bias was reflected in the day in day out teaching routine of primary school teachers in one Ghetto school.[8] He describes in detail the differential treatment given to students according to the teachers perception of their class and how this differential treatment resulted in a rigid caste system within the school. With school rewards and punishment distributed accordingly. He concludes:

> "It should be apparent, of course, that if one desires this society to retain its present social class configuration and the disproportional access to wealth, power, social and economic mobility, medical care, and choice of life styles, one should not disturb the methods of education as presented in this study. This contention is made because what develops a 'caste' within the classrooms appears to emerge in the larger society as 'class.' The low income children segregated as a caste of 'unclean and intellectually inferior' persons may very well be those who in their adult years become the car washers, dishwashers, welfare recipients, and participants in numerous other un or underemployed roles within this society. . . It appears that the public school system not only mirrors the configurations of the larger society, but also significantly contributes to maintaining them." [9]

The question, then, is not ought the schools be changed but in whose interests shall educators struggle to change them? Who shall our allies be? There is fear in our society and in our schools and the powerful will try to manipulate that fear. Students will be told unions are their enemies because of restrictive apprenticeship programs; union members will fear competition

from lower paid students; whites will be told that affirmative action is a major couse of white male unemployment; poor people and minorities will be told that they are oppressed because they don't play by societies rules and succeed in schools; middle class whites will be told that formal schooling is less and and less relevent to the demands of contemporary society. Millions of people will struggle for a small piece of the pie while the bulk of it goes to the few. And teachers will be told to do what they are told because they are a glut on the market and lucky to have jobs. Times like these give rise to despair but they are also times of great hope. As millions of middle class whites join the ranks of unemployed or underemployed, as more families require that both adults work to make ends meet, as the dream of home ownership receeds into the ever more distant future, and length of loan periods on major items like cars increases for many to four and five years; there will be increasing numbers of people willing to believe that there is something unjust about the structure of this society and willing to work to change it.

Teachers and schools can play a progressive role in transforming our society. If what teachers teach and the way they teach is based on an alliance with the progressive elements in their schools community they will find powerful and willing allies. Far to many of our schools are in communities but not connected to those communities by a web of shared interests. Many of our students can succeed in school only to the extent they are willing to change themselves into individuals who are willing to reject their cultural and class interests.

In describing the attitudes of the faculty at a university serving working class students, McDermott comments that they (the faculty):

> ". . . did not feel called upon to know the specific cultural history and experiences of the students they taught. Neither they nor anyone in their academic profession consider it their task to use their own superior symbolic gifts and wider historical perspective to identify the specific historical culture of their students, to clarify its ambiguities, to criticize it, purging it of its moral (not geographical)provincialism , and thus assist the students to develop a culture which is at once personally ennobling and politically self-conscious."[10]

Educators cannot cling to such attitudes if they are to be more than pawns of the powerful. Nor can educators allow themselves to hear the word community and think black community or the word disadvantaged and see black faces. The present curriculum of too many of our schools amounts to cultural warfare against not only many black children, but poor and middle class whites as well. An article on education in coal mining regions published in the United Mine Workers Journal reports:

> "The schools claimed to teach about the principles of democracy, using books which were filled with the names of all the governors and senators in the state's history, but didn't see fit to use as an example the miners long fight for democracy in their own union and coal field communities."
>
> "Basford had picked up a few stories about the union outside of school from relatives and people in the community, but basically this high school graduate says he came to his new position as a coal miner, union member, and adult citizen of a coal community with almost no understanding of the union and industry which are so important in his life."[11]

The curriculum in the schools in many coal mining communities apparently doesn't overtly attack the culture of the coal mining regions it simply ignores it. As a consequence it helps alienate the young in those communities from their cultural heritage and establishes the schools as alien presence. All of which has political significance. People whose past has been taken from them, whose present has been mystified, cannot construct an adequate vision of the future. To struggle to create and maintain freedom it is necessary to

recognize manifestations of injustice and oppression. Curriculum which retards such recognition is politically reactionary and serves ruling class interests.

The first task of the school as part of a community is to begin to make cultural criticism the basis of its curriculum and its instructional program. Within schools teachers can begin by asking themselves and designing activities which help sutdents ask questions such as: what elements of our national culture serve the interests of my community or the interests of people like me; if my interests are served what is the effect on other people; what social institutions touch my life every day? whose interests do they serve; how can those institutions be influenced? Such probing goes well beyond the scope and purpose of such classic "community involvement" strategies as bringing in "neighborhood helpers" to talk to primary school children or sponsoring anti-litter campaigns in junior high or high school. The purpose is different. Such questioning is designed to illuminate the world as it is and allow children to draw conclusions in a democratic and scientific fashion rather than sell a static conception of the world with what is good and what is bad clearly identified and labled and contained within distinct boundaries. A useful handbook for teachers who want their students to explore and question the world around them and the social relationships of that world as evidenced in their community is W. Ron Jones, Finding Community.[12] Although the content is now somewhat dated he provides a handy format for students to actively participate in the examination of their communities.

Any proposal requires interested, talented and dedicated people to carry it forward. However to rely solely on individuals struggling alone to change anything is a bankrupt strategy. On the other extreme relying on changes to be mandated from some higher source of authority reveals an elitest's lack of faith in the peoples ability to act in their own interests once those

interests are known to them. For educators that means that the best place to work for progressive goals is in individual schools. I agree with Goodlad that:

> "The single school is the largest and the proper unit for educational change. The single teacher is too small a unit to be a focus for significant change. Cultivation of teachers' necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes is no assurance that the culture of the school will support their use. The school system is too large a unit and it is structurally not organic. What is good for its maintenance frequently is a destructive pollutant for the school." [13]

If students can be involved in critically examining society as they experience it so too, teachers, students and community members can examine school practices and procedures. Such as examination requires the abandonment of the siege mentality exhibited by many school people. If the policies and procedures in a school do in fact best serve the interests of the school community and its children then those policies and procedures will be strengthened by criticism and inquiry. If they do not reflect those interests then teachers should be the allies of community members and children who seek to change them.

An examination of school policies and practices is filled with possibilities for curriculum development if teachers learn to use them. To do so however it will be necessary to move away from reliance on packaged curriculum materials developed by outsiders. Too often to walk into one elementary school is to walk into every elementary school. Educational corporations, large and small, peddle their wares regionally and nationally. Mainly old stuff in new packages. What variance there is in school curriculum is frequently limited to a narrow range of technical modifications within a standard format. We are asked to believe such modifications are significant much the way Burger King would like us to believe that "having it our way" somehow makes their product significantly different from that offered by Macdonalds who "do it all" for us.

Despite the slick attractiveness of many of these materials they have the cummulative effect of mystfying the world the children experience and erecting a barrier between the school community members. Molnar and Roy[14] have illustrated how elementary teachers could, given the desire, involve children and parents in curriculum development using readily available, inexpensive materials. Skills can be taught, knowledge acquired, and understanding deepened when teachers, children, and parents work together on the school curriculum because what is taught and what is learned is then far more likely to be rooted in the genuine experiences of the children in the community and not fabricated in some curriculum factory across the continent.

Educators are open to the same criticism that Victor Papanek levels at industrial designers in Design For the Real World. He attacks industrial designers for not designing products that people need. Products which are straight forward, useful and uncomplicated. In his Preface, Papanek proposes that one thing industrial designers could do for humankind would be to stop working entirely. However, he goes on to say:

> "It seems to me that we can go beyond not working at all, and work positively. Design can and must become a way in which young people can participate in changing society."[15]

Carrying this analysis forward into the schools and their curriculum tells us that curriculum would not only help students identify the nature of the social relationships in their communities but would also help provide them with the tools necessary to transform those relationships if they so choose.

The catch all criticism leveled at proposed changes in the nature and content of school curriculum is that the change probably represents some value position and that schools and their curricula must remain value neutral. Schools and their curricula are not nor are they ever likely to be value free. Contemporary analysis of curriculum materials used to teach such basic and supposedly "neutral" subjects as reading and math have found evidence of

pervasive racism and sexism. Even if it were possible to purge all curriculum materials of their racist and sexist content schools would remain under intense pressure to reflect the cultural interests of the ruling class. The argument over professional control versus community participation in curriculum decisions serves ruling class interests because it establishes a phony and unproductive conflict. The conflict is made to appear to be between professional expertise (which is claimed to be "objective" and value free) and the non-objective value laden interests of community members. Fundamentally the conflict is between the interests of those who want social relationships to remain as they are and those who would see them altered. The curriculum is the battle ground but it is not the issue.

In such battles the interests the status quo will always win if the problem, or issue is not posed correctly. Those interests will always win when the school and community stand apart from one another. The hope for schools to have a transformational role in society depends on their unity with the progressive forces in their communities. For teachers who are interested in seeing schools play such a role the place to work is not among the privi-ledged, it is among those who are not being served will by the system--and that does not rule out many places. The list of potential schools would include schools in white and blue collar bedroom communities as well as schools in the inner city. Examining the social relationships in those communities is more likely than not to reveal to teachers, students and community members bases for alliances across racial and caste lines that could be part of a larger process of social transformation. A good place for teachers to work, and a forum that can be responsive is professional groups. The inclusion of parents and students in professional activities as well as the organization of political caucuses within professional organization can not only help you identify allies but magnify your strength.

Practical minded teachers will fairly ask, but what do I do differently tomorrow? The honest answer is that curriculum materials and instructional strategies do not emerge from theory alone. It is true they are bounded by our intentions but they can only emerge from our practice. As teachers attempt to translate some of the ideas in this essay into the practice of their classrooms, ideas for activities will present themselves, and as teachers work with children using those activities the ideas presented here will be criticized, modified, and further developed, allowing the creation of additional activities and so on.

The following guidelines offer a place to begin thinking about how to work differently in your school. Hopefully you will use these thoughts as a basis for action.
fore, it is necessary to learn to act effectively without taking foolish risks. Here are some suggestions for deciding what action to take and how to take it.

1. Don't act if you don't want to. Don't pretend. Know what you are willing to do. If you are not clear you will get in other peoples way.
2. Start where you are. At every level of public education there are people who say change can only occur at some other level. Learn what you can do, don't dwell on what you can't.
3. Think small. All the steps that any of us take must be small. Don't confuse small steps with a small vision. Picking small issues you can win will give you momentum. Losing a big one will not.
4. Identify allies in the school and the community. Is there a person or two where you work that agrees with you? If there are then begin to talk, share ideas and

give each other support. Nothing will change as long as we remain isolated. A single good teacher can always reach an individual child but as long as teaching is an activity of isolated individuals the system will destroy thousands for every child reached. Only collective action has any hope of succeeding.

5. Do something tangible. Don't just share with your allies. Do something that others and perhaps more importantly you yourself see is changing something positively.

6. Be Positive. Too many good people unnecessarily separate themselves from potential allies by knowing better what they don't want than what they do want. Be prepared to explain what you are for not just what you are against.

7. Survey your resources. Know that you have or can get the human and material resources to make the change you are proposing. If you are the only resource for the proposed change it is likely the change will not last longer than you.

8. Involve students and community people. Help people see ways they can help you; concrete things they can do. Too often people would like to help but don't know how.

9. Know when to compromise. Two steps forward and one back is far preferable to no forward progress. Just remember compromises are creatures of circumstance, and circumstances change though not always right away.

10. Don't stop. Try and work on changes in such a way that changing one thing causes a confrontation with something else that should be changed. The history of attempts to

change almost anything provides plenty of examples of the seemingly dramatic one shot victory that has ultimately resulted in nothing, because people were willing to stop their forward motion when they thought they had "won."

It is difficult to write anything about changing education in America that is hopeful. It is difficult to think about changing American society and be hopeful. It is difficult not to be numb. But there are no saviors, we must do what needs doing or it will remain undone. The roots of our schools problems are buried deeply within our culture. We must never lose sight of that unalterable fact. We must learn better the connections between what we do in schools and what must be done in society. Changing the schools will not in itself change society but we can help make them laboratories in which students and community people can learn what changes can be made and how to make them. As Marcuse has said. . . "The joy of freedom and the need to be free must precede liberation."[16] Our steps will at first be small, but if they are progressive steps they can be significant.

NOTES

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